

# Advocating in 2015 for a sustainable, gender just and human rights based development framework for the next decades

NICOLE BIDE GAIN · FEBRUARY 18, 2015

Feminist and women's organizations from the global south have conceived the United Nations as a critical space for recognizing and advancing progressive policies towards the realization of women's human rights and alternative development frameworks.

Twenty years ago, the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) recognized the impact of globalization trends, structural adjustment programs and privatization in women's human rights and proposed measures that government should implement in order to revert these negative impacts. Among the recommendations, there was a strong recognition of the need to reform macroeconomic policies and development strategies to address gender inequality. Governments agreed to ensure that all corporations, the private sector, specially transnational corporations, "comply with national laws and codes, social security regulations, applicable international agreements, instruments and conventions, including those related to the environment, and other relevant laws, (para 165, 1)". Besides, new ways of generating additional public financial resources to tackle inequalities issues were considered, for instance, through the reduction "of excessive military expenditures" (para 143, b). Even if the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) was approved by governments in the context of the Washington Consensus, it has been a tool at the national and regional levels to promote policy change towards gender justice.

After the financial and economic crisis that hit South East Asia in 1997 and the launch of the Doha Development Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, developing countries initiated the International Conference on Financing for Development under the United Nations auspice in order to advance to a fully inclusive, integrated and equitable global economic system that could address the challenges of financing for development goals. The [Monterrey Consensus](#) adopted by governments in 2002 was the first attempt at the UN to address all the sources of financing and the global economic governance in a comprehensive and meaningful way. Members states agreed that the gender perspective must be mainstreamed into development policies at all levels and in all sectors (para 64) and recognized that "a holistic approach to the interconnected national, international and systemic challenges of financing for development – sustainable, gender-sensitive, people-centred development – in all parts of the globe is essential" (para 8). Six years later, at the [Doha Review Conference](#), governments stated: "we reiterate the need for gender mainstreaming into the formulation and implementation of development policies, including financing for development policies, and for dedicated resources. We commit ourselves to increasing our efforts to fulfil our commitments regarding gender equality and the empowerment of women" (para 4).

Progress in the implementation of the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action and its interlinks with Financing for Development agenda have been uneven and slow, especially in the context of economic models ruled by open and liberal markets. A combination of reasons can be highlighted: the growing concentration of economic power by corporate elites, shifts in geopolitical dynamics, the weakening of multilateralism, and the lack of political will to tackle global imbalances and implement development policies based on human rights and equality. The shaping of the global development discourse and priorities by the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals can also be considered as an element which prevented the full implementation of more comprehensive development agendas.

2015 is a critical year. After twenty years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, governments will gather in March at the UN to review its implementation. 2015 is also the expiration date for the Millennium Development Goals. Thus, governments will face the final stages of the negotiations of the Post 2015 Development Agenda that will be adopted in September. Meanwhile in July, governments will gather in Addis Ababa at the third International Conference on Financing for Development to assess the progress made in the implementation of the Monterrey Consensus and the Doha Declaration, identify obstacles and constraints encountered in the achievement of the objectives agreed and address new and emerging issues and their links with the Post 2015 Development Agenda. It is crucial to understand how governments will align their positions and what will be the bargaining chips and trade-off in each of these fora, in order to ensure that policies of the next decades will be guided by a gender just, equitable, sustainable and human rights based development framework.

### **From a market-based approach to a sustainable, gender just and human rights based approach to development**

It won't be an easy battle for feminists from the global south, especially in the context of globalization where corporations rule. Our past two year's engagement in the global negotiations showed us the recast of regressive discourses about women's human rights, gender justice and development. We have challenged these discourses through our different civil society platforms including [Righting Finance Initiative](#), [Women's Major Group](#) and [Women's Working Group on Financing for Development](#).

It can be said that after 20 years of the adoption of the BPfA there is a wider recognition of "women's role" in the economy. For instance, governments raise more than ever the issue of women's participation in the labor market, and the World Bank, the IMF and the G20 have been promoting the framework of [gender equality as "smart economics"](#). The challenge we currently face is to avoid the "cooptation of the language" and the instrumental approach to women's human rights as a mean for economic growth, reduction of poverty or "population" growth rates or as a vulnerable group. Dominant narratives are reducing women's economic rights to "economic empowerment" with the promotion of specific agendas such as market access for women to ITC, credits or investing in women because of the positive economic and social returns.

There is also a narrative that stresses that accelerating progress towards the MDGs, as well as achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the Post 2015 development agenda, will require the mobilization of

massive resources. Due to the global economic crisis and the decline on Official Development Assistance (ODA) figures, the private sector is framed as a “development actor” that will play a catalytic role in the new agenda. These discourses can be identified in different UN documents released by the Secretary General as well as by some experts and members states under the SDG, Post 2015 and FfD processes. For instance, this narrative is embedded in the “Elements Paper” circulated yesterday by the Co-facilitators of the FfD Conference. While the Monterrey Consensus affirms that achieving the internationally agreed development goals demands a new partnership between developed and developing countries (para 4), the Co-facilitators document states: “the implementation of the post-2015 agenda will require partnerships between a broad range of relevant stakeholders, leveraging their resources and unique skills and advantages”. This multi-stakeholder approach dilutes the Common But Differentiated Responsibilities principle between developed and developing countries.

So in 2015, especially in the context of the FfD Conference it is necessary to advocate for advancing policy commitment to implement the core recommendations to address the root causes of gender, social and economic injustice. Governments already agreed that gender perspective must be mainstreamed into development policies at all levels and in all sectors (MC, para 64). From a feminist critical point of view, this implies thinking about new forms of sustainable production and consumption patterns. It requires re-distribution of wealth, power and time. It also implies avoiding assumptions about automatic links between economic growth and gender equality and to look at the specific patterns of economic growth, their distributional effects according to gender, race, age, territories and to identify their impact on quantity and quality job creation (and destruction), access and use of resources and opportunities, impacts on the distribution of care work, as well as their environmental sustainability and global inequality, among others.

It also implies to look at the international trade, investment, financial rules and governance that erode national laws and policy space for developing countries to fulfill their obligations in crucial topics such as: human rights and environmental sustainability, the promotion of productive diversification, protecting infant industries or small and medium enterprises and farmers from unfair competition of multinational corporations, increasing social public expenditure and to tackle gender discrimination in labor markets, among others.

Other narrative that should be challenged is the prioritization of private sources of finance over the public ones. We have been saying that is difficult to conceive that the same actors and the same rules that contributed to a great extent to current global problems (such as a the financialization of the economy, unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, or using gender wage inequality as incentive for attracting Foreign Direct Investment) will be able not only to “don’t harm”, but furthermore, to “lead in” the sustainable development in the long term.

For instance, a [recent ECLAC study](#) shows that in Latin America greenfield investments represented around 60% of inward FDI between 2003 and 2013 and, it is estimated that these investments only accounted for about 5% of net job creation in the region in the period 2003-2013 (in an optimistic calculation). (ECLAC 2014, 14) According to the

study for every US\$ 1 million invested, only one job is created in extractive activities, while the same investment creates two jobs in natural-resource-intensive manufacturing. These sectors accounted for about 47% of investment amounts and 25% of new jobs announced in investment projects during the 10-year study period (Idem). No evidence was found to confirm impacts on other aspects of employment quality, such as greater job stability or a greater participation of women in the workforce.

Taking the above into consideration, it is important to acknowledge that the “Elements paper” consider some of the proposals we have been raising such as: “to commit to human rights impact assessment of all trade and investment agreements” and “elaborate binding environmental, social and human rights standards” in order to align investment agreements with sustainable development policies and plans.

Implementing these proposals will allow for instance, to reorient trade and investment to create decent work, by eliminating the gender pay gap, providing technology transfer, promoting links with small and medium enterprises and fostering territorial decentralization. These are key indicators of sustainable and gender just development patterns.

Finally, states are responsible to fulfill human rights, gender equality and sustainable development. They cannot transfer their responsibilities to actors and financial flows that are not predictable, that they cannot easily control. As we have stated in a [collective statement](#) “states have the duty to mobilize the maximum available resources, including through combating tax evasion and avoidance, and expand the tax base in a progressive way. Increasing the tax base in a progressive way would imply shifting the burden of taxes away from women, people living in poverty and other marginalized groups such as gays, lesbians and trans who are at the bottom of the income distribution towards highly profitable sectors such as the financial sector and the extractive industries that are benefiting from tax incentives and subsidies and using strategies of tax evasion and avoidance to shift their profits to low-tax jurisdictions”.

*Nicole Bidegain Ponte is a member of the Executive Committee of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era -DAWN.*